

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE MAR 2011	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Developing Key Leaders to Manage Complex Programs			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Defense Acquisition University, Defense AT&L , 9820 Belvoir Road, Fort Belvoir, VA, 22060-5565			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 2
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	

Developing Key Leaders to Manage Complex Programs

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In August 25, 2010, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Frank Kendall signed out a letter to the Services asking them to identify key leadership positions in their programs and to ensure the positions are filled by "properly qualified" individuals.

These key leadership positions are (with some caveats):

- Program executive officer and deputy program executive officer
- Program manager and deputy program manager
- Senior contracting official
- Program lead systems engineer
- Program lead cost estimating
- Program lead contracting officer
- Program lead logistician (product support manager)
- Program lead business financial manager
- Program lead test and evaluation
- Program lead production, quality, and manufacturing
- Program lead information technology.

To be properly qualified, key leaders need to have the requisite education, training, and experience that has distinguished them from their peers as recognized experts in their functional craft. In addition, key leaders are expected to function as an integrated senior management team to execute some of the most complex defense acquisitions. This may require some successful functional leaders to make a challenging shift in mindset from functional expert to key leader.

What, then, are the elements of change that need to occur for an individual to make this mindset shift to become a successful key leader? Five leadership paradigms must be embraced.

First, and perhaps most difficult for any individual at the top of his or her technical field, is “opening the aperture” to the interplay between key functions. As a key leader on a complex program team, the effort of every functional leader must shift from a focus on managing affairs within each narrow specialty to helping lead at the intersections of functional areas. Here, the “seams” are messier, and the tradeoffs often result in sub-optimized individual functions. The availability of less crisp and readily identifiable alternative solutions demands that contributing team members become comfortable with multi-functional, thorny, and chaotic problems.

The second paradigm shift is one of overall approach. For much of their careers, functional experts were expected to have all the right answers. As key leaders of a complex program team, these leaders are now expected to be able to ask the right questions. Key leaders now need to frame questions differently—not necessarily framed around a single function but considering how all the functions might work together to produce the right outcome. Questions are certainly informed by the expertise of the functional leader, but they must also be appropriately couched within the larger decision framework of complex functional interactions.

Embracing the “Big A” acquisition framework of requirements generation, budgeting, and traditional “Little A” acquisition is the third mindset change that must be made. Each member of the senior leadership team must understand the intricacies of how the pieces of the system work together and the broader implications, including possible unintended consequences, of

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every key decision. New stakeholders with new agendas enter the scene for functional leaders who have previously, perhaps, never had to deal with them. The leadership team must use their collective expertise to think through these decisions as a tightly integrated team and anticipate likely outcomes. Stove-piped thinking is no longer an option.

The fourth shift is temporal. The old saw says that “time is money.” Not only does a program’s top leadership team need to be able to make good decisions, they need to be able to make them quickly. A close and synergistic working relationship among the key leaders will facilitate quicker, more accurate, and less costly decisions.

Finally, the top leadership team cannot be content with its own successes. Some time must be set aside by members of the team to train and develop their replacements. The true mark of a good leader is in the ability to mentor and coach subordinates. This is much harder than it sounds, however, given the frenetic pace and massive workload in most defense program offices. There is almost never discretionary time available to have a leisurely mentoring session, so key leaders must make the time and incorporate the training and mentoring into the work itself through appropriate empowerment and delegation of meaningful tasks.

The Department of Defense is working to develop a pool of key leaders who are capable of leading large, complex programs to successful outcomes. The key leader pool will be made up of successful functional experts who must transform themselves into a cross-functional team of executive-level leaders capable of managing at the functional intersections. We can do this. Our future success depends on it.

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